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Book Reviews

BOOK NOTES

Bill Granger Blends Religion, Intrigue

By ED KELLY
News Book Reviewer

ONE OF THE HANDFUL of American spy novelists who successfully challenge Britain's heavyweights is Chicago newspaperman Bill Granger. He grows better with each story featuring U. S. secret agent Devereaux, code-named "November Man."

This, the eighth in the series, is a stunner. It shows an author who, in the brief period since 1986's "There Are No Spies," has honed even more keenly what already was outstanding talent for style and suspense.

SUSPENSE

THE INFANT OF PRAGUE
By Bill Granger
Warner Books
257 pp., $16.95

Devereaux, once a full-time field operative for a shadowy agency known only as R Section, leaves semi-retirement to escort a highly visible Czech defector to the West. Enroute, the Red turncoat is kidnapped and Devereaux captured by mercenaries bankrolled by corrupt security officials in Prague.

The latter, in turn, work for villainous American TV and film white-collar types who launder money for the CIA, enabling Uncle Sam to secretly buy Czech weapons for shipment to the Afghan rebels.

If this weren't sufficiently complicated, a Czech child movie star touring the U. S. causes media, political and ecclesiastical consternation by declaring she's seen a statute of the Christ Child as the Infant of Prague shedding tears in a Chicago church.

Not to fear. Granger pulls all of it together, logically and seamlessly, in yet another display of his prowess in labyrinthine storytelling.

He plays clever shell games with readers, cunningly keeping them off balance. Who's doing what, to whom, and why? Finally convinced you're certain of where this thriller is going, you're jolted to discover you're not even close. There's a disconcerting — but purposeful — fracturing of thought lines; injections of bureaucracy and spydom's weird shorthand; a lurking of the enigmatic between the lines.

All this lends the narrative an unsettling Kafkaesque quality, the creation of which is perhaps Granger's most mesmerizing talent.

Short and Sweet

A very nifty little whodunit, this, the more remarkable for being the author's first novel. What Californian Jeanne Hart has managed to do with plot, scene and character within fewer than 165 pages should make windier writers envious and inspire them to emulation.

FETISH
By Jeanne Hart
St. Martin's Press
164 pp., $12.95

The story idea — as are so many of the good ones — is simple. There are three lonely, middle-aged, casually-acquainted women in a northern California seaside community. They decide, almost playfully and certainly recklessly, to advertise in the local gazette for a male escort whose social attentions they would share. They do. Matters go swimmingly until human nature takes over, and the interpersonal relationships of all four principals are gradually poisoned by sexual rivalry, jealousy and deceit, culminating in murder. And the criminal isn't at all the one you'd suspect.

Hart does a fine job presenting her cast, each member taking on a life of her or his own. The ricocheting of their personalities, and interweaving of their past marital experiences, are especially well handled. And too, in cool and patient Carl Pedersen, Hart has created a police detective we hope to meet frequently in the future.

FOR YOUNG READERS

A Sending of Dragons, by Jane Yolen; Delacorte Press, $14.95 (ages 12 and up) — **Pet** dragons commune through "sendings" (something like telepathic communication) with Jakkin, a former dragon pit master in hiding on the planet Austar IV. Yolen creates a hauntingly vivid, often quite sinister world — and even succeeds in making dragons lovable — in this exciting third book of her dragon trilogy.

The Book of Adam to Moses by Lore Segal, illustrations by Leonard Baskin; Alfred A. Knopf, $13.95 — Baskin's eloquent pen-and-ink drawings and Segal's graceful translation make this a valuable addition to the library of Biblical texts aimed at young people. — ***Jean Westmoore***

PAPERBACKS

Rough Cider by Peter Lovesey and **The Curse of the Pharaohs**, by Elizabeth Peters; Mysterious Press, $3.95 each — Murder mysteries solved by engaging amateur Sherlocks in England's Somerset country and Egypt's region of antiquities.

Silversword, by Phyllis A. Whitney; Fawcett, $4.50 — A haunting tale of romance, danger and suspense in lush Hawaii.

1988 H & R Block Tax Guide & Workbook, Collier Books, $7.95; **J. K. Lasser's Your Income Tax**, Lasser Tax Institute, $8.95; and **Pay Less Tax Legally**, Signet, $5.95 — How-to aids for those about to grapple with their IRS returns. Trade books. — ***Ed Kelly***

THIS WEEK'S TOP TEN

Here are the best-selling books for the week ended Friday, compiled by Publishers Weekly:

FICTION

1—**The Bonfire of the Vanities**, Tom Wolfe.
2—**The Tommyknockers**, Stephen King.
3—**Presumed Innocent**, Scott Turow.
4—**Kaleidoscope**, Danielle Steel.
5—**Lightning**, Dean R. Koontz.
6—**Mortal Fear**, Robin Cook.
7—**2061: Odyssey 3**, Arthur C. Clarke.
8—**Patriot Games**, Tom Clancy.
9—**The Tenants of Time**, Thomas Flanagan.
10—**Mongoose: R. I. P.**, William Buckley.

NONFICTION

1—**Trump: The Art of the Deal**, Donald J. Trump with Tony Schwartz.
2—**Elizabeth Takes Off**, Elizabeth Taylor.
3—**Thriving on Chaos**, Tom Peters.
4—**The Great Depression of 1990**, Ravi Batra.
5—**The 8-Week Cholesterol Cure**, Robert Kowalski.
6—**The Cat Who Came for Christmas**, Cleveland Amory.
7—**Detour: A Hollywood Story**, Cheryl Crane and Cliff Jahr.
8—**Secrets of the Temple: How the Federal Reserve Runs the Country**, William Greiger.
9—**The Frugal Gourmet Cooks American**, Jeff Smith.
10—**Time Flies**, Bill Cosby.

Winners Tell Tales Behind '87 Pulitzers

THE PULITZER PRIZES
Volume One, 1987
Edited by Kendall J. Wills
Simon & Schuster
587 pages, $9.95 paper

By MARGARET SULLIVAN
News Book Reviewer

NEWSPAPER journalism, someone said, is history written in a hurry. It is, indeed, a pursuit that — daily — falls far short of perfection. Deadlines, sensationalism, bad judgment, amateurism all figure into its failures.

All the more reason, then, to welcome this collection of what went right with newspaper journalism in 1986. It is the first time that the winning entries have been brought together in book form.

Among the offerings:

✔ Richard Eder's lyrical, fair-minded book reviews in the Los Angeles Times.

✔ Berke Breathed's "Bloom County" cartoons that balance looniness with insight.

✔ The Akron Beacon-Journal's series on the corporate takeover attempt on that Ohio city's largest employer, Goodyear.

✔ David Peterson's poignant feature photographs in the Des Moines Register on the traumas of families who are losing their farms.

The Pulitzer Prize — to a journalist what an Olympic gold medal is to an amateur athlete — is coveted, sought-after, and much desired. But it may not always be awarded on merit alone. It's a given that winning may involve politics as much as talent and hard work.

For that reason, it may not be accurate to say that the work collected here is the best American newspaper journalism produced in a particular year. But anyone who spends a few hours with this collection will know that it is, at least, excellent work — the kind any journalist could be proud of, with or without the prize.

Wills — assistant editor of the New York Times op-ed page — provides a simple but effective structure for the collection. Each winner provides his own introduction, describing how he or she came to write the series or shoot the photos — the roadblocks, the time involved, the inspiration.

Sometimes the introduction is as absorbing as the work itself, as when three Philadelphia Inquirer writers describe the grueling three years it took them to come up with their series on their city's corrupt court system.

Three years of work produced six stories that ran one week in January of 1986. Not much to show for all that research time? Hardly.

Here's just one finding: Defense attorneys who were making significant contributions to judges' re-election campaigns were then appearing before those judges — with considerable success. More than 70 percent of the time, those lawyers won their cases, although the overall success rate for defense cases was only 35 percent. After the series was published, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court seized administrative control of the city court system, and various reforms began.

Who will read a volume like this? Other journalists will read it as a how-to book.

Historians will read it as a a preview of what will go down as important: the Challenger shuttle disaster, the Iran-Contra scandal.

Popular culture enthusiasts buffs — or anyone interested in America today — will read it as a commentary on our times.

Socrates reaches for the cup in "Death of Socrates," 1787, by Jacques Louis David.

Socrates: Suicide by Hemlock?

THE TRIAL OF SOCRATES
By I. F. Stone
Little, Brown
282 pages, $18.95

By GENE WARNER
News Book Reviewer

TALK ABOUT revisionist history.

I. F. Stone's "The Trial of Socrates" is the definition of revisionist history, a 2,400-year trip, almost an archaeological dig, into the written word of the Athens that prosecuted and sentenced Socrates to a cup of hemlock. The author even learned ancient Greek so he could decipher the original sources.

Stone sets out to answer one basic question: How could the city-state that prized free speech have condemned Socrates to death for exercising that right in his teachings? For his answer, he takes a close look at Socrates, and the portrait that emerges is not a flattering one.

Stone's Socrates is a rude bully, an arrogant elitist. He sneers at the jury deciding his fate, speaks with disdain of the laborers who formed the backbone of democratic Athens, and shows no tenderness when bidding goodbye to his wife, who labored to make ends meet while he enjoyed the luxury of life as a philosopher.

Nice guy, that Socrates.

There really are two books here. The first half explores Socrates in the context of Athens in the fifth century B. C., just before his trial. This is heavy stuff, even in Stone's lively pen, full of semantic explorations into the writings of Plato, Homer and Aristotle. Casual readers need not apply.

We learn basically that Socrates and Athens were at odds in their basic beliefs. Socrates saw the community as a herd that had to be ruled by a king; Athens believed in rule by the common

I. F. Stone learned ancient Greek.

man.

In Socrates' view, The common man never could overcome his limitations. Virtue was knowledge, and knowledge was unattainable to the common man. So ordinary citizens had neither the virtue nor the knowledge required for self-government.

Stone lampoons Socrates with an entertaining discourse on Socrates' absurd standards for defining terms. Grappling with the definition of knowledge, Socrates discussed shoemaking in the "Theaetetus" and horse-trading in the "Phaedrus."

Stone comments: "Socrates begins his argument in both dialogues with the truism that you cannot make a shoe without knowing what a shoe is, nor can you be a trader in horses without knowing what a horse is. But to know what a shoe or horse is, for the purpose of shoemaking or horse-trading, is it also necessary to meet the impossible standards of Socratic logic by coming up with an absolute and perfect definition of either shoes or horses? Must the shoemaker or horse-trader qualify for a Ph.D. in metaphysics?"

The going gets easier in the second half of the book, where Stone throws out some lively arguments on how Socrates antagonized his jury and how he could have won acquittal.

It's Stone's thesis that Socrates never could have been prosecuted without a change in the political climate created by attempts to overthrow the democracy and set up dictatorships in 411, 404 and 401 B. C. Only in that poisoned climate could there be enough suspicion of Socrates and his undemocratic teachings to make the prosecution possible.

Stone shines brightest in his research into how Socrates purposely antagonized the jurors with boasts, taunts and arrogance, looking "more like a picador enraging a bull than a defendant trying to mollify a jury." The tally to convict was 280-220.

Then came the penalty phase of the trial, when Socrates easily could have escaped the death penalty and received either a fine or banishment from the city. Under Athenian law, the jury had to decide between the penalty proposed by the defense and the one proposed by the prosecution. One or the other, no compromises. The prosecutors asked for death. Socrates proposed either no penalty or that he be declared a civic hero. The vote for the death penalty was more one-sided than the vote to convict.

"Socrates himself seems to put the hemlock to his lips," Stone writes.

The author explains why Socrates chose death rather than invoke the Athenian principle of free speech in his defense:

"Perhaps one reason he held back from that line of defense is because his victory would also have been a victory for the democratic principles he scorned. An acquittal would have vindicated Athens."

New Edition Enhances Meltzer's Rock 'n' Roll Study

THE AESTHETICS OF ROCK
By Richard Meltzer
Da Capo
338 pages, $10.95

By BILL BROWN
News Book Reviewer

"The Aesthetics of Rock" was first published in 1970, though excerpts from it had appeared in Crawdaddy magazine and Jonathan Eisen's "The Encyclopedia of Rock" as early as 1966, when author Richard Meltzer was a graduate student in philosophy at Yale.

Soon after he stopped writing about music (with the exception of articles about X and liner notes for The Minutemen) in the mid-'70s, the book went out of print. It had enjoyed "a lively underground reputation," but few really missed having it around because no one knew how to read it. Or rather, most could read only its utterly original interweaving of philosophical analysis and rock 'n' roll practice as some kind of hippie joke.

In 1986 Da Capo Press, usually known for its books about jazz and blues musicians, brought out a reprint with a new forward by the author — who doesn't regret a thing — and a new introduction by Greil Marcus.

Since the publication of "Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music" in 1975 and "Stranded: Rock and Roll For A Desert Island" in 1979, Marcus has been the music columnist for several publications. In his recent columns, he has been exploring the relationship between rock 'n' roll criticism and certain aspects of what the academics call "post-structuralist" theory.

He suggests we read Meltzer in terms of "the centrality of everyday life to rock 'n' roll and vice versa," and that if we do, we can't help but see that Meltzer did "a long time ago" what the post-structuralist academics are doing today.

"And so, 'The Aesthetics of Rock' does not read like an artifact of some vanished time, but like an oddly energized version of real cool academic discourse," Marcus claims with ample justification.

Conservative Essays on Culture Are Startlingly Good/Bad

THE NEW CRITERION READER:
The First Five Years
Edited with an introduction
by Hilton Kramer
Free Press
430 pages, $24.95

ORTHODOXY:
The American Spectator Anniversary Anthology
Edited with an introduction
by R. Emmett Tyrell Jr.
Harper and Row
511 pages, $24.95

By JEFF SIMON
News Book Reviewer

THE LIGHTS were low, the music was sweet, and before you could say "Edmund Wilson," Marxism and artistic modernism somehow wound up in the same bed.

A tricky intellectual business that, and one that has occupied an awful lot of thought in the 20th century, not to mention fistfuls of influential little magazines (the Partisan Review, etc.). What was one to do, for instance, with Ezra Pound intoning "make it new" on one hand and spouting anti-Semitic fascist demagoguery on the other?

As Al Jolson used to say, "you ain't heard nothin' yet." As the woozy pub-crawl of the 20th-century intellectual moves toward closing time, the child of the earlier, ill-advised union has suddenly appeared: the neo-conservative who takes modernism as orthodoxy, always stands at attention as capitalism and bourgeois democracy pass by, and never passes up an opportunity to lob a grenade into the cultural and political barricades of the '60s. Foundations and corporations smile, open their wallets, and say: "At long last, our kind of intellectual."

Meanwhile, on the left, every possible opportunity is taken to lob grenades into the neo-con artillery nests. The knee-jerk and sophomoric nastiness of these debates can be most dispiriting. Far too many have the tinny sound of campus

Hilton Kramer, left, and Samuel Lipman: who's humorless?

political clubs trying to recruit from opposite sides of the student union. If you listen to those debates seriously, you come up with a Hilton Kramer, who is a rabid buffoon and pretentious super-twit.

Kramer was, for years, the art critic of the New York Times and a constant contributor to the usual places — the Partisan and Hudson Reviews, the New York Review of Books, the New Republic, etc. Then in 1982 he and music critic Samuel Lipman got together and formed their own magazine, the New Criterion, dedicated to defending "high art in a democratic society" and making as much mincemeat as possible out of intellectual radicals who loathe America to the marrow while gorging on the fruits of its freedoms and prosperities. A freeze-dried Samuel Johnson for the '80s, in other words. Their "new criterion" would be "the criterion of truth" said Kramer, as self-righteous a manifesto as any, but not unadmirable.

Let's admit what has to be admitted. Kramer is nothing if not humorless. (The picture of him and cohort Lipman on the dust flap of "The New Criterion Reader" is unintentionally comic. They look as if they're about to tell the photographer to jump off the Chrysler Building.)

And his pop culture bashing and modernist sanctimony do indeed have their elements of unwitting blockheaded buffoonery. A little conspicuous indulgence in the more profane cultural pleasures would no doubt serve him well. (Pop and high culture are only enemies in second-rate ideologies. If pop culture is, in any sense, the instrument of high culture's decline it is NOT the reason. The reasons lay within.)

Having said all that, it's time to give Kramer his due: "The New Criterion Reader" is brilliant. I am not a regular reader of the magazine, but this anthology of its best is a constant pleasure and not just one kind of pleasure either.

There are the pleasures of superbly written pieces on juicy subjects — Joseph Epstein on Waugh and Max Beerbohm, Hortense Calisher on Barbara Pym, Donald Hall on Philip Larkin. And there are the pleasures of contentiousness — Cynthia Ozick on Cyril Connolly, for instance, or Kramer on virtually everything (Andy Warhol's death, etc.).

There is mostly, as Kramer knew, enormous pleasure in truth, and it seems from this anthology the immense virtue of the New Criterion to ask all the right questions.

Not to know that high culture is in a mendacious and emaciated state in the countdown years of the century is either not seeing the forest for the trees or being so blinded by ideology as to be useless. And unlike some neo-con opinioneering, the New Criterion hasn't shied away from one of the most insidious developments on the cultural watch — the progressive march of corporate sponsorship of the arts with twin consequences: the constant pressure to program blandly and the abdication of artistic standards for whatever might be new.

Lipman, as a card-carrying music critic, is particularly forthright about this, but Roger Kimball is particularly savage about "Pride of Place" on PBS, where this new form of corporate culture has found its most virulent home.

Rene Wellek's "Destroying Literary Studies" is an exemplary essay on the oft-discussed "profound malaise" that has settled over literature in the wake of the higher gobbledygook of semiotics and deconstruction. (A student who quite innocently wants to study literature at a major university today is liable to find himself in a Tower of Babel where everyone gets idiotic pleasure out of the absence of translators.)

"The New Criterion Reader" has the major virtue of any fine anthology: while the names aren't always stellar, there are few, if any, dogs among its contents. Almost everything in it is pertinent and lucid and engaging, if not always dazzlingly written.

"Orthodoxy" is something else again. There isn't nearly as high a percentage of engaging work. Far too much is only for the resolute right-winger or devoted poli sci student (of whatever age). And there are some pieces — a reflection on ugly women by the British "satirical" essayist Taki — that probably shouldn't have seen the light of day.

If Kramer found himself a neo-con by cultural default, R. Emmett Tyrell of the American Spectator was to the manor born. As a writer he quite consciously styled himself as a new Mencken for the '80s, which means that however funny he sometimes is, he can also be depressingly dated, not to mention doctrinaire. He winds up being the somewhat disreputable godson of William F. Buckley Jr.

Still, any anthology that presents us with work by Tom Wolfe, Hugh Kenner, Lewis Lapham, P. J. O'Rourke, George Will, Michael Novak, John Simon, Josef Skvorecky, Sidney Hook, Malcolm Muggeridge, Luigi Barzini and David Niven (David Niven? Yes, David Niven) can't be all bad.

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